

CHAPTER 15

CHILDREN IN THE FOREIGN SERVICE

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ADVANCE PREPARATION

Consider the needs of your children when bidding and planning for future assignments. Many will agree that the older a child gets, the harder it is to move. Try to plan your assignments so that at least the crucial last two years of high school will not be interrupted. Be sure to find out if a post can accommodate the special needs of your children BEFORE bidding on it.

Include older children in the bidding process. Have them help do the preliminary research on different posts, listing pros and cons. Be sure to let them know how much they realistically can influence the process; do not pretend to offer them choices that they really cannot make. Younger children may also enjoy looking at pictures or videos of places where they might go live. Much of this information is available at the Transition Center's Overseas Briefing Center, with increasing amounts of material online. Wait until you actually have been offered the assignment before making definite statements about your destination—and try not to overemphasize future plans. You may want to wait to introduce the idea of a new post if your children have faced frequent moves and need more time to feel settled.

Introduce both younger and older children to others their age who have moved or will be moving overseas. The Foreign Service Youth Foundation sponsors groups for teens—Around the World in a Lifetime (AWAL)—and pre-teens (Globe Trotters) in the Washington area, along with a Web site and newsletters for more distant members. The Associates of the American Foreign Service Worldwide (AAFSW) offers playgroups in the Washington area. Seeing other children move can help even preschoolers begin to accept relocation as a "normal" part of life. (Staying in touch with distant friends via e-mail and other methods can help reassure them that life does not stop when you move away.) There are also a number of good children's books about moving and living as a "Third Culture Kid" (see "Resources," below).

ONCE YOU HAVE YOUR ASSIGNMENT

Learn as much about your new country as possible, using books, videos, Web sites, and other resources. Ask the CLO Coordinator at post to give you the name and contact information of others at post with children of similar age so you can begin corresponding. If possible, obtain photos of your new house and school. Children feel more comfortable if they can visualize where they will be going.

Give your children the benefit of training. Among AWAL participants asked to list what they liked least about overseas life, 35 percent mentioned moving, 28 percent leaving behind friends, and 28 percent language barriers. The first two of these are inevitable in Foreign Service life: you can help your children avoid the third. Arrange for age-appropriate language training, whether via tapes, videos, books, computers, tutors, or formal classes. Try to interest them in family classes at the Transition Center so they learn what to expect of embassy and overseas life.

AS THE MOVE NEARS

Let your children help prepare for the move, as the time approaches. Try to give them a sense of control by letting them make decisions such as which toys to discard, carry with them, or send with household effects. Let them come up with a few ideas about how to decorate their new rooms or find other ways to give them something to look forward to in their new home. Visual aids such as checklists or charts of things to be done can be helpful; draw pictures and use stickers for the youngest children.

As appropriate, communicate with your children about what is happening and what it means for them. Try to be positive, but explain any difficult aspects of the move clearly and simply. They will pick up your attitude, anyway, and not knowing the reason for your tension could cause unnecessary worry. For younger children, you may want to read stories about moving, create your own "book" telling what will happen, or help them act out the process with stuffed animals or dolls. No matter what their age, do not try to tell children how they should feel; instead listen carefully to them. It is normal to be sad about leaving friends, excited about going to a new place, worried about a new school, angry at parents for causing all this upheaval, and more. Taking time to listen is also essential to finding out if children have developed inaccurate ideas about the post ("We are moving to Africa and I am going to have a zebra in my bedroom!") If you can gently dispel these notions, adjustment to post realities should be easier.

Do not let the long list of things to do keep children from seeing friends or participating in special events. Leaving is hard enough without making preparations seem like punishment. Try to maintain the daily routine; this can help children feel more secure. It may help to start some new rituals that can be continued wherever you are: a certain bedtime story, a special weekend breakfast, or a song you sing together.

During the rush of pre-departure preparations, take time to help your children say goodbye to the people and places they love most. Suggestions from Foreign Service families include giving each child an address book to collect contact information, creating a scrapbook or Web site together to reflect the important people and places in your present life, and/or having a goodbye party for each child and his or her friends. Create and distribute cards with the child's name, new address, and e-mail address to help friends remember to keep in touch.

If you have young children, be sure to arrange for plenty of help. Trying to accomplish everything you must do with toddlers in tow is a sure recipe for frustration and frayed nerves. Most parents suggest hiring a babysitter for pack-out; if this is not possible, you may want to have one parent take the child out so the other parent can concentrate on supervising the movers.

PACKING TIPS FOR FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN

Here are some suggested items for inclusion in your air freight (Unaccompanied Air Baggage or UAB):

- children's books—especially large story collections, which give lots of mileage
- battery powered tape player or walkman (because the voltage may not be the same)
- books on tape—very comforting in a new bedroom
- a few videos (do not forget the VCR and television if your post cannot supply them temporarily)
- LEGO® bricks—they are small, light, and enjoyable for a range of ages
- a few computer games if you are bringing a computer
- clothes for the next season or that layer in case your household effects are delayed
- shoes one size larger than they wear when you leave your previous post
- board games like checkers, Othello, and Battleship. Travel sizes are even better.
- crayons, markers, and colored pencils
- sketchbooks, coloring books, sticker books, workbooks
- Play-Doh® (psychologists say that playing with this can reduce stress)
- stuffed animals for company in a new bed
- Frisbee, lightweight sports equipment, pail and shovel, other small outdoor toys
- larger items that will make a substantial difference (bicycle, scooter—since weight is limited, choose carefully)
- decorations that make the new house feel like "home" (posters, pictures, a clock with a familiar sound, etc.)
- baby supplies (diapers, formula, etc., if these cannot be obtained at post). If household help is readily available, you may want to purchase cloth diapers to avoid having to ship huge quantities.

If your household effects may be delayed—and it is wise to assume that this may happen—find out if you can mail additional packages to yourself. Check with someone at post and arrange for boxes arriving early to be picked up; storage space is often a problem.

TRAVEL WITH CHILDREN

Take your children's needs into account when scheduling travel. Some families prefer to arrive shortly before school starts so children will have the chance to make friends and get into their new routine almost immediately. If arriving during a holiday period, try to make arrangements in advance for your children to meet others their age. Single parents may want to make prior arrangements for time off upon arrival to locate good child care options and help children adjust—or schedule travel for a time when a trusted friend or family member can come along and help out for a week or two.

Make sure that you know the regulations concerning rest stops, upgrades, and so on so you can choose the best option for your family. Some families prefer to travel directly to post, feeling that they are all too exhausted to enjoy a vacation. Other families plan travel breaks to enjoy time for family togetherness and relaxation after the rush of getting everything ready.

Allow plenty of time between flights in case of delays. If you expect a long wait at an airport, research the facilities in advance. Make note of observation decks, play areas, hotels that allow you to use the facilities (many now offer "day passes"), or other kid-friendly features. Information for an individual airport should be available on the Internet or from others who have used the airport. If you anticipate a difficult trip, you may want to plan for an overnight stop, even if you have to pay for it yourself.

Advance planning can make long journeys easier. Following are tips from veteran Foreign Service travelers:

1. Explain your travel plans in advance at each child's level, including length of flights, stops, what you will do, people you will see, and so on. It may help to write plans on a calendar, so that they can visualize the trip. Agree upon and review an easy-to-remember contingency plan in case your family gets separated at any point.
2. Lower your expectations. Do not expect your children to sleep, stay in their seats, or behave well—then you will be pleasantly surprised if they do. Realize you will need to focus your attention on them and that sleeping, reading, or civilized adult conversation are unlikely.
3. Get as much help from the airline as possible. If you have a stroller or infant carrier, ask to "gate check" these so you can use them right up until boarding the plane. Request help if you need to change planes, particularly if you are traveling alone with children. The airline can arrange to transport your entourage in a motorized airport vehicle.
4. Some families make a point of requesting seats in the bulkhead. These seats offer some advantages such as more leg room, as well as a place for smaller children to lie down and sleep (or play). There is no one in front of these seats to be annoyed by talking or kicking. There are, however, a number downsides of bulkhead seats that may negate certain advantages: inaccessible carry-on bags during take-off and landing; arm rests that cannot be raised; meal trays (folded up in the arm rests) that are flimsier than regular seat-back trays; video screens too close to be visible; the fact that other passengers may cut through the space and step over your child; and the policies of some airlines that require the floor to be clear at all times. Weigh the advantages against the disadvantages and determine what is important for your family.

5. Talk to your health care provider about giving your children Dramamine or Benadryl to ease motion sickness and help them sleep. Test the effects on your children before traveling, since these medications have no effect on some children and agitate others. If your children are suffering from colds or allergies, you may want to give them Sudafed or Dimetapp (which may also make children drowsy).
6. Pack at least one change of clothes for each person (including adults) in accessible carry-on luggage. Increase this to two or more outfits for longer trips. Consider putting your children in "disposable clothes," old t-shirts and leggings that you can throw away at the end—or in the middle—of the trip. Pack sweaters or sweatshirts for cold planes and over-air-conditioned airports.
7. Order children's meals from the airline when you confirm your flights, but bring enough food for mealtimes anyway. Meals may not arrive when your children are hungry, and they may not like airline food in any case.
8. Bring cups with lids or sports bottles for each person (including adults). Immediately transfer any airline beverages into these containers to avoid disastrous spills. Bring plenty of water, especially if you are traveling to or through countries without potable water.

Let your children choose some items for the carry-on bags, then finish packing them yourself. Suggested items to pack (adapt to your child's interests and your tolerance for cleaning up) include:

- Plenty of snacks, drinks, candy, and gum (plan something for your children to eat, drink, or chew during takeoff and landing to help relieve ear pressure)
- Lots of wipes
- Thick paper towels or whatever you prefer to clean up spills and messes
- Lots of resealable plastic bags (for wet or dirty clothes, trash, wet towels used to clean up spills, etc.)

Toys or activities that have worked for other families include:

- Hand puppets
- Books (new or anthologies with lots of stories)
- Books of finger games
- Pipe cleaners
- Travel-sized magnetic drawing boards
- Laptop computer with games or a kid's film if you have a DVD player (remember that the battery will only last two to three hours; you may want to buy a second battery for traveling. Be sure to leave enough power so you can turn on the computer if asked to do so during an airport security check.)
- Other electronic handheld games, with extra batteries
- Sewing cards
- Craft projects (such as looms for making potholders)
- Cassette recorder with headphones (for listening to tapes and recording travel experiences, if your child enjoys talking)

- Paper, coloring books, or sticker books
- Crayons, markers, colored pencils, or small packs of other favorite art materials
- Small containers of Play-Doh®
- Travel-sized board games
- Small gifts to be unwrapped each hour (gift-wrapped or packed in balls of crepe paper to be unwound)
- Disgusting non-stick slimy gel (this really is available at most local toy stores)
- Colorforms®

If you need to save money, shop at a consignment or thrift store, trade with a friend, or put toys away a few weeks before travel so that they will seem "new."

ARRIVAL AT POST

During the first few weeks, politely decline social events that will require you to leave your children with a complete stranger. Ideally, you have already explained your circumstances to your sponsors or new colleagues before arriving, and they have thoughtfully scheduled events accordingly.

Try not to get so caught up in the new list of things to do that you do not have time to explore your surroundings with your children. As soon as you can, find something new and fun to do as a family. It will help turn your mind away from what you left behind and toward the new adventures ahead.

Schedule in some quiet family time together to do the same sorts of activities you have done in the past. Keep up the rituals. Something as simple as reading a chapter each night from a long book that you started in the United States can give a sense of continuity and sameness during the upheaval of moving.

Expect the adjustment process to take at least six months, although every child reacts differently. Be aware that each age group faces specific challenges:

SPECIAL ISSUES FOR INFANTS AND PRESCHOOLERS

The logistics are difficult and the messes are likely to be large, but this age group is the easiest to move in terms of their adjustment to a new country. Young children take their cues from their parents. If you are comfortable with the move, they usually will be, too. Take care of yourself, and you will take care of your baby.

Children may regress for a time during a move. Do not be surprised or get upset if toddlers behave badly, wet the bed, want bottles, cling to your legs, or become weepy and cranky. This is not a good time to begin toilet training, weaning, or getting rid of a favorite blanket or toy.

Routines and familiar objects and food will help ease the transition to the new, unfamiliar setting. Try to provide a consistent environment for your young children. Give them extra loving care and attention, impossible as it may seem with all that you need to get done.

Do not be unrealistic in your expectations of yourself. Moving is stressful and you may find it difficult to be patient. Give yourself a break, too.

SPECIAL ISSUES FOR ELEMENTARY SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN

Children in this age group may have difficulty leaving a familiar house or packing up their things. They are beginning to make real, lasting friendships, which makes separations more difficult. Their self-esteem is partially based on the skills they develop. Since there will be many things they do not know how to do in a new country, parents should focus on helping them develop abilities that will transfer to the new environment.

Elementary school students overseas may miss learning about certain topics, including U.S. history and geography, the use of U.S. currency and more. Be aware of these gaps and try to fill them in by teaching children at home, finding a tutor, getting books on these topics, or utilizing relevant software.

From this age on up, schools play an important part in choosing assignments. For more information on education options, see Chapter 16, "Education for Foreign Service Children."

SPECIAL ISSUES FOR PRE-TEENS

Pre-teens are in the process of developing a cultural identity, which is a big part of who they are. If your family is living primarily overseas during these years, consider frequent trips so pre-teens can reconnect with their "home" culture. Keeping in touch with peers via e-mail may also help.

SPECIAL ISSUES FOR OLDER TEENS

Moving is usually most difficult for older teens, who resent having to leave their friends. Teens may lash out in frustration against parents. Be prepared for this possibility.

If your teen will complete high school overseas, be sure to check on potential colleges well in advance. It may be difficult to make decisions based on university catalogues and Web sites. If your teen plans to graduate in the United States, make sure that all credits will transfer and all requirements will be met for graduation.

Getting a driver's license, having a part-time job and participating in organized sports are all "normal" teenage activities in the United States. Plan ahead and do what you can if your child resents the lack of these opportunities (for example, you may be able to arrange a driving course during home leave. See the Family Liaison Office publication "Baby You Can Drive My Car" (<http://hrweb.hr.state.gov/flo/train/PAPER31.pdf>) about obtaining a driver's license in the Washington, DC, area).

Make sure that you choose a post with a large enough group of potential friends and activities. Mobility is important for this age group, so try to choose places where your teen can get around safely alone, whether walking, bicycling or using public transportation.

REINFORCING YOUR HOME CULTURE

If it is important to you that your children consider the United States "home," then you will have to make an extra effort to provide the opportunity for them to experience U.S. life. Plan to make extensive trips back to the United States and help them to keep in touch with U.S. relatives and friends. You may want to make a point of celebrating U.S. holidays in traditional ways. You may also want to make sure that they experience every day life in the United States, not just a series of vacations and shopping trips. Remember that your children do not have the lifetime of experience in the United States that you have. They only have what you provide them.

LEAVING POST

When it is time to leave again, make time to follow the same leaving and preparation procedures as before. Your children may face particular difficulties in returning to the United States, primarily if you fail to realize that, after years away, the United States is another foreign country to them. They are not returning home in the same way that you are. Prepare them as thoroughly as you would for any other post. The publication *According to My Passport I'm Coming Home*, available through the Family Liaison Office or online at <http://www.state.gov/m/dghr/flo/rsrscs/>, offers perspectives on the difficulties and adjustments children face upon returning to the United States from overseas.

GROWING UP OVERSEAS

There are certain difficulties that may be associated with Foreign Service life. Children who grow up overseas may feel "rootless" and have trouble with questions about where they are from. They may feel that they do not belong anywhere. They may find it difficult to live in the present, always focusing on where they have been and where they will be going next. They may fail to develop skills at resolving interpersonal problems, since these often can be "fixed" with a move. Their education may suffer from inconsistent school systems and interrupted studies. As adults, Foreign Service kids may have trouble settling down or forming long-term attachments. They are very likely to choose international occupations.

On the other hand, children can benefit tremendously from their overseas experiences. They learn other languages and experience other cultures first-hand. They have many opportunities that they would never have in the United States. They tend to become more resourceful, open-minded, and flexible than other children. They are adaptable and usually deal well with adults. They often have a greater understanding and tolerance of differences than their peers in the United States. They tend to have a greater social conscience, probably from experiencing the realities of other countries with fewer resources. On the whole, they enjoy closer family ties than members of geographically rooted families do. They may benefit from outstanding educational opportunities, depending upon where they live. They may gain strong feelings of self-confidence from their abilities to adapt to new situations. Their international experience and expertise may provide a competitive advantage in an increasingly global economy.

RESOURCES

Offices and Organizations

Associates of the American Foreign Service Worldwide (AAFSW)

5125 MacArthur Blvd. NW, Suite 36

Washington, DC 20016

Tel: (202) 362-6514

Fax: (202) 362-6589

Internet: www.aafsw.org

Email: aafsw@starpower.net

Playgroup for young children and parents, scholarship program, teen volunteer awards

Employee Consultation Services
Office of Medical Services Main Office
Room H246
2401 E Street, NW
Washington, DC
Tel: (202) 663-1815
Fax: (202) 663-1456
E-mail: MEDECS@state.gov

First stop for referrals to counseling, other services for children in difficulty

Foreign Service Youth Foundation (FSYF)
P.O. Box 39185
Washington, DC 20016
Tel: (301) 404-6655
Website: <http://www.fsyf.org/>
E-mail: fsyf@fsyf.org

Offers a number of publications, plus the Around the World in a Lifetime (AWAL) group for older teens and Globe Trotters for pre-teens. If you are in the Washington, D.C., area, encourage your kids to go.

Family Liaison Office (M/DGHR/FLO)
Education and Youth Officer
Room 1239
Department of State
Washington, DC 20520
Tel: (202) 647-1076 or (800) 440-0397
Fax: (202) 647-1670
Website: <http://www.state.gov/m/dghr/flo/>
E-mail: flo@state.gov

Information on schools, other programs for children. Also numerous publications regarding education and youth

Office of Overseas Schools (A/APR/OS)
Room H328, SA-1
Department of State
Washington, DC 20522-0132
Tel: (202) 261-8200
Fax: (202) 261-8224
Website: <http://www.state.gov/m/a/os/>
E-mail: overseasschools@state.gov
Information on overseas schools

Overseas Briefing Center (M/FSI/TC/OBC)
The Transition Center
George P. Shultz National Foreign Affairs Training Center
Room E2126
4000 Arlington Blvd.
Arlington, VA
Information Center telephone: (703) 302-7277
Fax: (703) 302-7452
Website: <http://www.state.gov/m/fsi/tc>
E-mail: FSIOBCInfoCenter@state.gov
Much special information for kids, including videotapes made by children about various posts

Publications

Third Culture Kids. Paper published by the Family Liaison Office.

<http://www.state.gov/m/dghr/flo/rsrscs/>

Third Culture Kids—Returning to Their Passport Country. Paper published by the Family Liaison Office.

<http://www.state.gov/m/dghr/flo/rsrscs/>

Bell, Linda. *Hidden Immigrants*. Based on interviews with adults who grew up as Foreign Service or "third-culture" kids.

McCluskey, Karen Curnow, ed. *Notes from a Traveling Childhood*. Foreign Service Youth Foundation, 1994. An anthology of writing about and by Foreign Service children, this book is a must for Foreign Service families with children.

Pollock, David C. and Van Reken, Ruth E. *Third Culture Kids: The Experience of Growing up among Worlds*. Nicholas Brealey/Intercultural Press, 2001. A balanced perspective of the benefits as well as the challenges inherent in being raised as a TCK.

Roman, Beverly D. *Let's Move Overseas* and *Let's Make a Move*. Wilmington, NC: BR Anchor Publishing, 1999. "Creative visualization activity books" for children; 32 pages of activities to help children eight and under get used to the idea of moving.

Taber, Sarah Mansfield. *Of Many Lands*. Foreign Service Youth Foundation, 1997. A beautiful book that will help older Foreign Service kids (and adults) work out their cultural identities and put together their own stories of growing up overseas.

Web sites

<http://www.tckworld.com>

Bibliographies, links, resources, etc. for third-culture kids

<http://www.gnvv.org/>

E-mail: info@gnvv.org

The Web site for Global Nomads Virtual Village, an Internet-based, non-profit, organization providing people who have grown up overseas a permanent "place" to keep in touch. Includes global nomad-related information and resources

<http://www.tckinteract.net/>

Resource of development programs, services, and publications that address the needs of third-culture kids and internationally mobile families

<http://expat-moms.com>

Information for parents raising children internationally

<http://www.flyingwithkids.com/>

Everything you need to know about flying with kids. Links to airlines worldwide

<http://www.travelwithyourkids.com>

Specific ideas on traveling with children